



HARVARD
School of Public Health

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Poll: Sick in America

Summary

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This poll was conducted in order to examine sick Americans' experiences with and perceptions of the costs and quality of medical care over the last year. "Sick" Americans (27% of adults) are defined as those who said they had a serious illness, medical condition, injury, or disability requiring a lot of medical care or who had been hospitalized overnight in the past 12 months. Despite the fact that most sick Americans surveyed have health insurance, the financial costs of health care are a serious financial problem for many sick Americans and their families today. Some sick Americans report having been turned away from getting medical care due to financial or insurance reasons. Additionally, some sick Americans say they did not get needed medical care because they could not afford it.

Despite high health care expenditures in the United States, many sick Americans report quality problems, including instances when they believe the wrong care was provided to them, or when they were concerned about some aspects of the medical care provided to them. Some Americans who have been hospitalized overnight in the past 12 months also say they have experienced several quality of care problems, including getting an infection while in the hospital, getting the wrong diagnoses, treatment, or test, and not being able to see a nurse when needed.

The poll also looked at the views sick people had about the seriousness of health care quality and cost problems nationally. Rising costs of care are seen as a serious problem for the country by most sick Americans. Sick Americans see the following as top reasons for the rising costs of health care: excessive charges, people not taking care of themselves, and fraud and abuse by medical providers. Despite concerns of high health care costs, a majority of sick Americans think they get a good value for what they pay for their health care.

About two-thirds of sick Americans think there is a serious problem with the quality of the nation's health care. However, their concern over the quality of care in the nation is lower than their concern for the high cost of care in the nation. Sick Americans see a wide range of issues that contribute to quality problems across the nation. These include problems related to insurance plan restrictions, lack of availability of quality services, and concerns about some aspects of the way care is provided. A majority of sick Americans want their encounters with their physicians to involve discussions about broader health issues, than just their specific medical problem.

[Chart numbers refer to separate chartpack]

I.) Costs and Quality of Health Care Experiences of Sick Americans

1. Sick in America: Personal Experiences with Health Care Costs

Health care costs are a serious financial problem for many sick Americans and their families. Four in ten sick Americans report that the cost of their medical care over the last 12 months has caused a "very serious" (20%) or "somewhat serious" (23%) problem for their or their family's overall financial situation. [Chart 3] About half of sick Americans say the out of pocket costs of medical care are a "very serious" (25%) or a "somewhat serious" (23%) problem for them. [Chart 4] About a quarter of sick Americans (23%) say they have had a problem with

their insurance paying a hospital, doctor, or other health care provider in the past 12 months. [Chart 5] About one-third of sick Americans think the amount they paid for medical care in the past 12 months was “somewhat unreasonable” (13%) or “very unreasonable” (19%). [Chart 6] In addition, about four in ten Americans who were hospitalized overnight in the past 12 months think the amount they paid for the medical care they received in the hospital was “somewhat unreasonable” (19%) or “very unreasonable” (20%). [Chart 24]

Some sick Americans have problems getting medical care due to financial reasons. One in six sick Americans say that there was a time in the past 12 months when they could not get the medical care they needed (17%). [Chart 8] Among the sick Americans who could not receive care, 52% report they could not afford the needed care, and 24% say their insurers would not pay for it. [Chart 9] The problem is more severe for individuals who have not had insurance at some point in the past 12 months. Forty percent of those who had been without health insurance at some time in the past 12 months say there was a time when they needed medical care, but could not get it, compared with 10% of those who had been insured for the entire year. [Chart 10] About one in ten sick Americans (11%) report being turned away by a doctor or hospital for financial or insurance reasons at some time during the past 12 months when they tried to receive care. [Chart 11]

2. Sick in America: Personal Experiences with Quality of Care Issues

Many sick Americans have experienced situations where they believe the care provided was not appropriate. For instance, about one in eight sick Americans believe they were given the wrong diagnosis, treatment, or test (13%). About one in six sick Americans believe they did not get the tests they thought they needed (18%), while 15% of sick Americans were tested or treated for something they believed to be unnecessary. Also, about a quarter of sick Americans say that their condition was not well-managed (26%). [Charts 17-20]

Many sick Americans report problems with some aspects of the medical care provided to them. Some of these problems involved a lack of communication. A quarter of sick Americans report that a doctor, nurse, or other health professional did not provide all the needed information about their treatment or prescriptions (25%), or they had to see multiple medical professionals, and no one doctor understood or kept track of all the different aspects of their medical issues and treatments (23%). Three in ten sick Americans say that a doctor, nurse, or other health professional did not spend enough time with them (30%). In addition, 14% of sick Americans could not get an appointment or a referral to see a specialist they thought they needed. [Charts 17-20]

About half of sick Americans are highly satisfied with the quality of the medical care they have received, but the other half of sick Americans have more divided views. Forty-seven percent of sick Americans are “very satisfied” with their medical care. However, 39% of sick Americans are “somewhat satisfied,” but they think “some things could have been better” with their medical care in the past 12 months. Nine percent of sick Americans are “somewhat dissatisfied” with their care, and believe that “a lot of things could have been better.” Four percent of sick Americans are “very dissatisfied” with their medical care. [Chart 21]

3. Sick in America: Personal Experiences with Hospitalization

Similarly to the quality of care in general, about half of hospitalized Americans are very satisfied with the quality of care they received in the hospital, while the other half of hospitalized Americans have more divided views. Fifty-one percent of hospitalized Americans are “very satisfied” with the quality of medical care they received while they were in the hospital. However, 32% of sick Americans are “somewhat satisfied,” but they think “some things could have been better” with their hospital care. Seven percent of hospitalized Americans are “somewhat dissatisfied” with their care, and believe that “a lot of things could have been better.” Nine percent of hospitalized Americans are “very dissatisfied” with their hospital care. [Chart 23]

Some hospitalized Americans have experienced quality of care problems while in the hospital. About one in ten hospitalized Americans report getting the wrong diagnosis, treatment or test (11%), and one in twelve hospitalized Americans report getting an infection in the hospital (8%). About one-third of sick Americans who were hospitalized in the past 12 months, say nurses were not available when they needed them, or did not respond quickly to their requests for assistance (34%). In addition, three in ten hospitalized Americans say there was poor communication among the doctors, nurses, and other health care professionals involved in their care (30%). [Charts 26-27]

II.) Views of the Sick Americans on Cost and Quality Problems in America

1. Sick Americans’ Assessment of Health Care Costs and Reasons for Cost of Care Problems

Rising costs of care are seen as a serious problem for the country by most sick Americans. About nine in ten sick Americans (89%) see the cost of care as a “very serious” (73%) or a “somewhat serious” (16%) problem for the country. [Chart 29] Furthermore, seven in ten sick Americans believe that the cost of health care in the country has gotten worse over the last five years (70%). [Chart 30]

Sick Americans see these as top reasons for rising health care costs: excessive charges, people not taking care of themselves, and fraud and abuse by medical providers. About three-quarters of Americans believe that drug companies (85%), hospitals (78%), and insurance companies (75%) charging too much money are major reasons for rising health care costs. Seventy percent of sick Americans say that people not taking good care of their health, which leads them to need more medical treatment, is a major reason. Also, about six in ten sick Americans (61%) say fraud and abuse by some hospitals, doctors and nursing homes is a major reason. [Charts 31-32]

Despite concerns about high health care costs, a majority of sick Americans think they get a good value for what they pay. Nearly six in ten Americans believe they get a good value for their money when they think about the cost and quality of their health care (59%). However, about one-third of Americans believe they do not get a good value for their money (33%). [Chart 34]

2. Sick Americans' Assessment of Health Care Quality and Reasons for Quality Problems

About two-thirds of sick Americans think there is a serious problem with the quality of the nation's health care. However, their concern over the quality of care in the nation is lower than their concern about the cost of care in the nation. About two-thirds of sick Americans (65%) see the quality of care as a “very serious” (45%) or “somewhat serious” (20%) problem. [Chart 37] Sick Americans are more divided over whether quality has gotten better over the past five years. About a third of Americans believe the quality of care has gotten worse (32%). About four in ten of sick Americans think the quality of health care has stayed the same (39%), while 27% of Americans believe it has gotten better. [Chart 38]

Sick Americans see a wide range of issues contributing to quality problems across the nation. These include problems related to insurance plan restrictions, lack of availability of quality services, and concerns about aspects of the way care is provided. Close to eight in ten sick Americans believe that people not being able to afford to get the tests or drugs they need (78%) is a major reason for quality problems. A majority of sick Americans also believe that the following issues related to the availability of care are major reasons: many people not being able to get access to the high-quality doctors and hospitals that exist (74%), and people not getting the tests or drugs they need (63%). Seven in ten sick Americans also say the influence of health insurance plans on treatments decisions is a major reason for problems with quality of care (70%). In addition, over half of sick Americans believe people getting too many tests or drugs they do not need is a major reason for quality of care problems (58%). [Charts 39-40]

A majority of sick Americans want their encounters with their physicians to involve broader health issues. Nearly three-quarters of sick Americans want their doctor to spend time with them discussing other, broader health issues that might affect their long-term health (72%), as opposed to just talking about their specific medical problem (21%). [Chart 41]

II.) Views of the American Public as a Whole

In addition to surveying sick Americans, we also polled the opinions of the general public on reasons for cost and quality of care problems.

1. General Public's Assessment of Health Care Costs and Reasons for Cost of Care Problems

Rising costs of care are seen as a serious problem for the country by most Americans. Most Americans (87%) see the cost of care as a “very serious” (65%) or a “somewhat serious” (22%) problem for the country. [Chart 43] Furthermore, nearly two-thirds believe that the cost of health care in the country has gotten worse over the last five years (65%). [Chart 44]

Americans see these as top reasons for rising health care costs: excessive charges, people not taking care of themselves, and medical malpractice lawsuits. About three-quarters of Americans believe that insurance companies (77%), drug companies (76%), and hospitals (74%) charging too much money are major reasons for rising health care costs. Sixty-eight percent of Americans say people not taking good care of their health, which leads them to need more medical treatment, is a major reason. Also, more than half of Americans (56%) say medical malpractice lawsuits are a major reason for rising health care costs. [Chart 45 and 46]

Despite concerns about high health care costs, a majority of Americans think they get a good value for what they pay. Nearly six in ten Americans believe they get a good value for their money when they think about the cost and quality of their health care (61%). However, about one-third of Americans believe they do not get a good value for their money (34%). [Chart 47]

2. General Public's Assessment of Health Care Quality and Reasons for Quality Problem

More than half of Americans think there is a serious problem with the quality of the nation's health care. However, their concern about the quality of health care is lower than their concern about the cost of care in the nation. More than half of Americans (57%) see the quality of care as a “very serious” (35%) or “somewhat serious” (22%) problem. [Chart 50] Americans are divided over whether quality has gotten better over the past five years. About half of Americans think the quality of health care has stayed the same (46%). A quarter of Americans believe the quality of care has gotten worse, while 27% of Americans believe it has gotten better. [Chart 51]

The public sees a wide range of issues contributing to quality problems across the nation. These include problems related to insurance plan restrictions, lack of availability of quality services, and concerns about aspects of the way care is provided. Close to eight in ten Americans believe that people not being able to afford to get the tests or drugs they need (78%)

is a major reason for quality problems. A majority of the public also believes that the following issues related to the availability of care are major reasons: many people not being able to get access to the high-quality doctors and hospitals that exist (61%), and people not getting the tests or drugs they need (53%). Nearly two-thirds of Americans also say the influence of health insurance plans on treatments decisions is a major reason for problems with the quality of care (64%). In addition, half of the public believes people getting too many tests or drugs they do not need is a major reason for quality of care problems (50%). [Chart 52 and 53]

A majority of the public want their encounters with their physicians to involve broader health issues. Nearly 7 in 10 Americans want their doctor to spend time with them discussing other, broader health issues that might affect their long-term health (68%), as opposed to just talking about their specific medical issue (27%). [Chart 54]

3. Looking Back Over Three Decades on the General Public's Attitudes Towards Doctors: 1983-2012

Little has changed over the past three decades in regards to the public's attitudes towards doctors. On the positive side, about three-quarters of the public still believe that doctors are usually up to date on the latest advances in medicine (73% in 2012 and 72% in 1983*). On the negative side, less than half of the public still believes that most doctors spend enough time with their patients (39% in 2012 and 38% in 1983*), and that doctors are active in holding down the cost of medical care (36% in 2012 and 22% in 1983*). [Chart 56]

Unlike three decades ago, a large majority of people now believes that doctors usually explain things well to patients. Sixty-four percent of Americans believe doctors explain things well, compared to 49% in 1983*. [Chart 56]

Similar to public's attitudes towards doctors, there has been little change in the public's assessment on the number of doctors in their community. About one-third of the public believes/ed there are too few doctors in their community (32% in 2012 and 29% in 1983*). [Chart 57]

*Note: * The 1983 data are from the American Medical Association, "Attitudes on Health Care Issues Survey," August 1983.*

Methodology

This poll is part of an on-going series of surveys developed by researchers at the Harvard Opinion Research Program (HORP) at the Harvard School of Public Health in partnership with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and NPR. The research team consists of the following members at each institution.

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NPR: Joe Neel, Deputy Senior Supervising Editor; Anne Gudenkauf, Senior Supervising Editor, Science Desk.

Interviews were conducted via telephone (including both landline and cell phone) by SSRS/ICR of Media (PA), March 5 – 25, 2012, among a nationally representative sample of 1508 adults age 18 and over. Of these, 516 respondents were identified as “sick,” defined as those who said they had a serious illness, medical condition, injury, or disability requiring a lot of medical care or who had been hospitalized overnight in the past 12 months. The margin of error for total respondents is ± 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of error for “sick” respondents is ± 5.3 percentage points. Questions specifically about experience during hospitalization were asked of 291 respondents; the margin of error for the hospitalized group is ± 7.2 percentage points.

Possible sources of non-sampling error include non-response bias, as well as question wording and ordering effects. Non-response in telephone surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary for different subgroups of the population. To compensate for these known biases and for variations in probability of selection within and across households, sample data are weighted by household size, cell phone/landline use and demographics (sex, age, race/ethnicity, education, marital status and census region) to reflect the true population. Other techniques, including random-digit dialing, replicate subsamples, and systematic respondent selection within households, are used to ensure that the sample is representative.

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